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ABSTRACT

Administrators desiring to lead organizations that will adapt and survive in a complex environment like today's public schools need to develop what Karl Weick calls "complicated" understanding of "requisite variety." The law of requisite variety states that a diverse and complicated environment demands similar diversity from its inhabitants if they are to monitor it accurately enough to survive. Despite tendencies toward simplifying, homogenizing, and crudely registering consequential events to save time and streamline decision-making, arguments for developing complicated understanding are persuasive. When managers broaden their capacity for perceiving organizational events, the organization benefits from more effective problem-solving, greater understanding among subordinates and publics, and more productive use of dissent. This paper discusses instructional activities designed to develop complicated understanding of three central phenomena: (1) organizational careers; (2) organizational culture; and (3) bases of local school support. The first exercise required students to explore diverse career experiences through interviews with administrators in aspired-to positions. To explore organizational culture or school climate, students were asked to observe organizations of their choice, read related material, and discuss puzzles and inconsistencies involving what they had seen and heard. Students studied school politics by developing oral history interview questions to probe citizen attitudes toward public schools. Included are 21 references and 2 appendices containing guidelines for the interview and observation projects. (MLH)

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"COMPLICATING" EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATORS

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"Complicating" Educational Administrators

The aim of educational administration programs is to prepare administrators for educational organizations--organizations which face increasingly complex issues, constraints, participants, and publics. In considering the implications for preparation programs of increasing complexity in the world of educational administrators, it is useful to review some of Karl Weick's notions about organizational survival and adaptation (1979). In particular, Weick introduces the notion of **requisite variety** which has to do with how systems regulate their activities in relation to their environments. The law of requisite variety states that a diverse and complicated environment demands similar diversity from its inhabitants if they are to monitor it accurately enough to survive. Weick summarizes the implication of requisite variety for organizations and their leaders:

> [O]rganizational processes that are applied to equivocal inputs must themselves be equivocal. If a simple process is applied to complicated data, then only a small portion of that data will be registered, attended to, and made unequivocal. Most of the input will remain untouched and will remain a puzzle to people concerning what is up and why they are unable to manage it. (1979, p. 189)

An overall prescription for administrators who wish to lead organizations which will adapt and survive in a complex and fluctuating environment such as that of public schools, is to develop what Weick calls "complicated" understanding. Weick puts it very simply: "No one is ever free to do something he can't think of" (1979, p. 193).

There are, of course, difficulties associated with implementing Weick's advice in educational administrator preparation programs. The multitude of demands on administrators' time and energy suggest the most useful approach would be to increase **simplicity**. However, Weick argues, developing "complicated" understanding is important precisely "because the primary thrust of organizations is toward simplification, homogeneity, and crude registering of consequential events" (1979, p. 261). A second difficulty may follow from Weick's prescription: "the paralysis of analysis." Presumably, a "complicated" administrator will take in more, will be sensitive to equivocalities, and will gather alternative perspectives. The availability of multiple interpretations may magnify the difficulty of settling on a single action.

Even so, the benefits of developing complicated understanding are persuasive. Bartunek, Gordon & Weathersby (1983) have argued that when managers develop a broadened framework for understanding organizational events, in addition to the benefits of more effective managerial problem solving, there are benefits throughout the organization, such as other organization members' broadened understanding of problems, greater managerial understanding of subordinates and publics, more productive use of dissent within the organization (if multiple perspectives are recognized, then disagreement can be appreciated as enhancing variety of interpretations and alternative

actions), and the possibility of developing more adaptive organizational responses by drawing on multiple perceptions.

The focus in this paper emerges from the idea that educational administration programs could do a better job of preparing "complicated" administrators. To illustrate the application of Weick's notions to the preparation of educational administrators, I will discuss in this paper instructional activities designed to develop "complicated" understanding of three phenomena central to the lives of administrators. These phenomena are featured in many educational administration and policy graduate programs, though no doubt are emphasized to varying degrees. The phenomena are (a) organizational careers, (b) organizational culture, and (c) bases of support for local schools.

Organizational Careers

One phenomenon about which I believe it is important to "complicate" students' ideas is organizational careers, administrative careers in particular. Given the relatively high proportion of fulltime administrators among graduate students of educational administration, this might seem unnecessary. However, there are a number of ways in which our thinking about administrative careers in educational organizations is oversimplified. These can be expressed as questions:

> Are career opportunities orderly (Carlson, 1979), or are careers "eccentric predicates" (Weick, 1976)?
>
> To what extent do we find confirmation of the idea that there are only a few successful administrative career

paths in public schools (Gaertner, 1980), and does this idea apply similarly to male and female, white and minority aspirants?

How do administrative careers differ if we adopt theoretical perspectives--in particular, psychological (Schein, 1978) and structural (Kanter, 1977)--rather than reading descriptive accounts (e.g., Wolcott, 1973; Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985)? Do psychological and structural perspectives reveal differences in men's and women's careers in school administration?

In order to "complicate" the thinking of graduate students about these ideas--that is, to integrate descriptive information about administrative careers with theoretical perspectives, to consider ways in which the story of the white male's career in school administration does not reflect the experiences of others, and to examine the suggestion that careers are "casual in their structure" (Weick, 1976, p. 6)--one can ask students to go beyond reading and discussing Schein (1978), Kanter (1977), Wolcott (1973), and Blumberg & Blumberg (1985).1

In a course on administrative careers taught last year, each student focused on an administrative position to which she or he aspires, identified several people occupying such positions, and approached one or more of those individuals to request an interview. Students developed interview questions which both produced a coherent career story and

1. In Spring 1987 there were students interested in college and university administration in this course as well as public school administration aspirants; the higher ed students read, in lieu of Wolcott on the principalship and Blumberg & Blumberg on the superintendency, Kauffman (1981) on the college presidency, Morris (1978) on the academic deanship, and Appleton, Briggs & Rhatigan (1978) on college student personnel administration.

were grounded in theoretical issues we were covering in class. (Guidelines for this project appear in Appendix B.)

Among the results of this assignment was the capture of a diversity of career stories which, for some of these students, began to address the silence in the literature about women as educational leaders. Further, students were able to observe ways that practicing administrators "make sense retrospectively" of their career histories, rather than seeing only orderliness or an either-or choice in an individual's career history. When students presented their career interviews and their learnings in class, members benefitted from "inside views" of a variety of positions and issues which arise for people doing that work. Male students learned about the dilemmas women feel they face, and students were able to compare the experiences of adminsitrators in several positions. The question of whether careers make people (as a structural perspective might argue) or people make careers (as a psychological theorist might assert) came alive in the career stories gathered and students saw the possibility of a synthesis of these perspectives.

Organizational Culture

The notion of organizational culture has been addressed partially by studies of what Halpin & Croft (1962) called and Howell et al. (1987) call "school climate." Owens (1987) defines organizational climate as focusing on "perceptions that individuals have of various aspects of the

environment in the organization" (p. 168) and organizational culture as "the study of the wellsprings from which the values and characteristics of an organization arise" (p. 167). Owens sees organizational climate as "related to, and subsumed under, organizational culture inasmuch as the perceptions of individuals in the organization reflect the values and belief systems in the environment of the organization (p. 169). Owens warns his readers against confusing the two concepts, and students who have passing familiarity with both notions do tend to find them confusing.

As a way of introducing students to organizational culture, I propose an exercise which invites students (in an introduction to organization theory course) to do some observing themselves (see McCarthy & Trice, 1985-86, for a detailed account of this kind of field experience). Our collective introduction to the notion that organizations might be conceived of as cultures was Chapter 5 of Gareth Morgan's Images of Organization (1986). From there, students went into organizations of their choice and observed for several hours, making notes on what they saw and heard (see Appendix A for class handout on observations); we discussed the projects in class over the next two weeks while people continued to observe; and, in the third week devoted to looking at organizations as cultures, students made brief presentations of their discoveries. During this span of time students read additional readings (e.g., Burnett, 1969) and were directed

in discussions and through readings to explore puzzles, inconsistencies, and contradictions in what they saw and heard, as well as to pay attention to the surface indicators of culture (e.g., rituals, language, symbols, myths).

This exercise encourages "complicated" thinking about what goes on in everday organizational life. Instead of studying climate through reading research based on questionnaire data alone, the reading was followed by an observation assignment which provided students with some clues about things to look for, but required them to get closer to the perspective of an organizational insider. They were required to explore the less visible elements of an organization's context and ponder the effect of these elements on people's organizational lives. Further, emphasis on contradiction, disagreement, and inconsistency (borrowed from anthropological field methods) yielded data which call into question the assumption that organizational culture is a monolithic phenomenon through which all members are integrated. At the core of some cultures are debates rather than consensus; in others, subtle cues point to a contradiction which underlies an apprently uncontested image or belief. For example, dissent or fragmentation emerged in the data gathered by students who expected to find unity in the cultures of a fundamentalist academy and a Unitarian church. Coercive tactics were observed in a Christian college where one of the values espoused was freedom. Seeing these kinds of discrepancies "complicates" the picture of organizational cultures; in addition to

examining the subtleties of how culture is expressed, students notice variation in expressions within a single organization.

Bases of Support for Public Schools

A third phenomenon which educational administration students may come to view as a relatively straightforward matter falls into the areas of local school politics, educational public relations, school-community relations, or communication theory--that is, the bases of public support for public schools and more broadly, public opinion.

When students of educational administration encounter these notions they are likely to be introduced to them either through reading the annual Gallup polls of the public's attitudes toward public schools, or by one of several texts--Saxe's School-Community Relations in Transition (1984) or West's Educational Public Relations (1985), for example. Neither West nor Saxe present opinion surveys as the only method to achieving good school-community relations or good public relations; however, both emphasize the value of surveys. The focus here on attitude surveys is intended to suggest ways in which students' thinking about the promises and assumptions of survey data may be "complicated."

"Needs assessment" (Saxe, 1984) and "interactive communication" (West, 1985) are both intended to link citizens and their schools--both aim at attaining support for public schools. Surveys of public attitudes such as

those conducted annually by the Gallup Organization since 1969 have been identified by Saxe, West, and others as a major instrument in the effort to attain public support. But attempts to influence citizen behavior and beliefs based on the kind of information polling makes available may be misinformed. Surveys simplify important complexities in attitudinal data in at least three ways: (a) national surveys ignore powerful factors of local context; (b) simple classifications homogenize diverse populations; and (c) cross-sectional data obscure attitudinal change over time.

The introduction to this idea can be made through Gallup reports or local survey data, but ought to point out variation of the three kinds above. For example, I emphasize that (a) educational preferences and politics vary from community to community; (b) Gallup and other surveys report data for categories of respondents such as "nonparent" which include a diversity of people (in this case, young people who do not have children but plan to in the future, young professionals who plan not to have children, senior citizens whose children have long since completed their schooling, middle-aged people who are childless) and seem to assume commonalities if not similarity among them; and (c) life cycle factors (such as childbearing or retirement) may affect people's attitudes and preferences about schooling, but rates and kinds of change over time vary among individuals so surveys of the attitudes of "yuppies," for example, provide only a snapshot view. I then suggest ways in which our understanding of

public opinion about schools and education might be "complicated" (as spelled out in Bell, 1987). Among these approaches to developing a more elaborate picture of citizens' educational policy preferences is the collection of "schooling histories."

Class members are assigned the tasks of developing oral history interview questions to elicit recollections of school experiences and of building on Gallup questions to come up with probes into citizen attitudes toward aspects of today's public schools. Each student then uses those questions to gather attitudinal data and schooling histories from one or more citizens. In this process, an appreciation is developed for factors such as citizens' own experiences which may influence educational beliefs but are rarely tapped in explanations of public opinion. Further, an appreciation of the shifting nature of preferences over time is possible. Students may hear ambivalences expressed, or views of educational practices revised when more information is given; these expressions point out that attitudes fluctuate and evolve as a result of experience and open to question the helpfulness of cross-sectional survey data as a basis for long-term administrative plans such as public relations programs.

Summary

Weick advises managers to develop their resistance to tendencies of simplifying, homogenizing, and registering crudely important events; he encourages development of the

capacity to perceive environments in all their complexity and from multiple persepctives. In its summary form, Weick's direction to managers is, "Complicate yourself!" (1979, p. 261).

Given the rate of change and the degree of uncertainty in the environment of public schools, and the relationship between "complicated" understanding and organizational adaptation and survival, there is value for educational administration programs in "complicating" administrators. The purpose of this paper has been twofold: to present the idea that the development of "complicated" understanding is worthy of our attention, and to stimulate, by illustration, our thinking about how this development might be facilitated.

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APPENDIX A

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Guidelines for Interview Project

Overview

The interview project will consist of three steps. First, students will develop a set of questions to elicit the background, experiences, and work-related beliefs of a practicing (or retired) administrator. Second, students will identify a willing individual and will conduct an interview with that person. Third, students will prepare a paper which describes and interprets the interviewee's career-related story. Each student will have the opportunity to recount her or his project for the class on April 13.

The Paper

Your interview papers should be written in two major sections--the first should describe the individual whose experiences you learned about, and the second section should analyze the person's experiences and views in light of the concepts we have studied in this course. In other words, the first part of your paper will be a portrayal of a person and the second part will be your effort to "make sense" of your interviewee's experience and perspective.

Consider addressing a range of questions in your analysis. We will have touched on, for example:

- Are there conflicts (involving Schein's three spheres) evident in this person's story?
- How self-aware is the person? Does s/he recognize the conflicts and themes in her/his situation?
- How has the individual experienced the administrative role(s) occupied? Is s/he adjusted to it? Has s/he changed her/his life to fit the demands of the role, or has the organization adapted to accomodate the individual in any way? Were there aspects of the role which came as surprises to the actor? How have personal costs related to the position affected your interviewee?
- How have institutional structures and processes and organizational structures and processes interacted with your interviewee's work and ambitions? Has s/he encountered any organizational barriers? What is the individual's understanding of the opportunity structure, i.e., how does s/he describe and explain it?

Interviewing

Understand that your interviewee is giving you a gift when s/he talks with you. Interviews require time and energy and the willingness to think aloud, perhaps about unpleasant as

well as pleasant experiences. If you keep this in mind, you will be more likely to have a successful conversation.

A few hints:
(1) Honor your interviewee. Respect her/his privacy, be prepared for the interivew, and don't wear out your welcome. If you wish to tape record, obtain permission first.
(2) Your interviewee has the right to know how her/his comments will be used and who will have access to them. Be sure to make clear your intentions. If you promise anonymity, tell your interviewee how you will protect her/his identity.
(3) Don't assume you know what the person means by general statements or ambiguous terms. Ask for examples. You will learn alot by "playing dumb." This will be even more important if you are interviewing someone you already know.
(4) Keep track of experiences and views in the person's exact words when you can. Quotes and specific descriptions of events will help your readers understand how your interviewee sees the world.

APPENDIX B

Early observations require patience and a consciously open mind. As your time in a setting accumulates you will begin to develop key impressions of people, activities, situations. Record these as well as the particulars you are noting. The list of questions one might pay attention to is mammoth, but could include any of the following:

1. What are the inconsistencies in the organization? (instances in which people say one thing and do another)
2. What are the disagreements, fights, conflicts about?
3. Are there "insiders" and "outsiders?" Who are they?
4. What behaviors are rewarded? Prohibited? Are there codes of behavior?
5. How is time handled? Is it relevant for the organizational situation/ setting of interest?
6. Are there mottos, slogans, logos?
7. What kind of language clues are there? Metaphors? Imagery?
8. What about the leaders? (Formal, informal) Who is she, he?
9. What are the daily rituals, the routines?
10. What's puzzling? Are there practices or choices you don't understand?
11. Are there collective activities? Rituals of celebration, mourning, encouragement, initiation? What happens right before and right after these rituals?
12. Are there posters, buttons, other artifacts which provide clues to expectations, aspirations, beliefs?
13. "When a thing is funny, search for a hidden truth". (George Bernard Shaw)